

*“The quality of mercy is not strained  
it droppeth like the gentle rain from heaven  
upon the place beneath. It is twice blest  
It blesses him that gives and him that takes,  
'tis mightiest in the mightiest, it...”*

It was at about this point that a sibling would throw a cushion at me and cut short the enthusiastic eleven year old Thespian in his prime. I am sure Kenneth Branagh didn't have to face such stern critics. Shakespeare was part of my growing up as someone in the family seemed always to be studying some play or other for A-level or O-level, and so be ever learning lines, which I would recite with them. I knew Marc Antony's great speech following the assassination of Julius Caesar before I was ten, recognising it as a model of how to work an audience. That's the “Friends, Romans and Countrymen lend me your ears” -one. And I could do “To be or not to be” at the drop of a ...

The opening lines to this homily were the opening lines of Portia's great speech at the trial scene in “*The Merchant of Venice*”, when she secures Antonio's freedom and leaves poor Shylock angry and resentful at being cheated again. She extols the virtues of mercy as blessing the giver and the recipient. And who could think otherwise. Mercy is the quality of God, and is surely to be welcomed by all (Shylock apart).

Yet, we see so often that when mercy is proffered, not everyone welcomes the offer being made.

Last week, in the Parable of the Father with two wayward sons, the elder son was angered by the benevolence of his father towards his younger brother. Earlier this year we saw how when Jesus began his ministry in his home town of Nazara the locals, his kinsfolk, nearly killed him, upset that in his manifested, taken from the prophet Isaiah, he promised sight to the blind, liberty to captives but stopped short before he quoted Isaiah on behalf of the Lord God bringing a day of vengeance. This oppressed people would have liked a bit of vengeance meted out by God on their oppressors. Mercy was not on their 'to do list' if they had a chance for a bit of revenge on their sworn enemies.

Nest Sunday we will listen to the Passion account according to Luke and we will hear the wonderful words of Jesus, as the nails are being hammered into his wrists and feet, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”. This is a disputed verse, which is to say, it appears in some ancient editions of Luke's Gospel but is not present in others. It seems that either some scribe put it in or some one of that noble profession censored it and removed it.

If someone put it in they must have had a close knowledge of Luke's style and vocabulary, because it is so very like the way he writes. Did someone take it out? That is the more likely possibility. But why would someone remove a line of such beauty? Because they saw in it not beautiful sentiments of loving forbearance but an unjust appeal for those who were beyond the possibility of mercy, because they had committed a crime that could never be forgiven, their sin was unforgivable for all time; they were stained with an indelible stain that eternity could never clean.

For some in the early Church and for many down the centuries the Jews were guilty of a sin that could not and should not be forgiven; guilty of an eternal crime. And the guilty and unforgivable were not the men who handed Jesus over to Pilate for sentence; the guilty were all Jews of all time.

I hope that sounds absurd. It is clearly nonsense. But it was believed and proclaimed by the great thinkers and saints of the Catholic Church – John Chrysostom, St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the list is long and the words written and spoken are chilling. Shylock in the Merchant of Venice is a caricature of a Jew, cunning, money-grabbing and despicable; hated and envied. It is only within the life time of many of us, those who are over fifty, that the official teaching of the Church has been stated with unambiguous clarity. In the Declaration *Nostre Aetate* (In Our Age) paragraph 4, we read:

*“Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed, as if this followed from Holy Scripture. Consequently all must take care, lest in catechising or in preaching the Word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ.”*

A small document was issued last month to commemorate the anniversary; called “Reflections of Catholic Jewish Relations” it relates the growing together of the two faiths since the promulgation of the Vatican Council's document. In the past half century we have seen close cooperation between scholars to the enrichment of both sides; St Pope John Paul II visited the synagogue in Rome and the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and the concentration camp at Auschwitz; Pope Francis has also prayed at the Western Wall. Pope John Paul II has called the Jewish people our elder brothers and sisters in the Covenant, and Pope Benedict called them our fathers in faith”.

All this is relevant, in a way, to today's lovely Gospel passage which speaks of forgiveness. It, like Luke's verse was suppressed by some. The story seems to have been free floating in the early Church, known but not settled anywhere as people disputed its value. Finally Jerome included it in his translation of the Bible into Latin, the *Vulgate*” (=‘for the people’) in its place in chapter 8 of John's Gospel. But it is

controversial: Could Jesus forgive a blatant sinner who does not confess? What about all the people who have gravely sinned and whom the Church expects to do mortification and penance before a return to the Sacraments is possible? And she goes scot-free!

“The quality of mercy is not strained...” but others strain against the idea of mercy. Mercy can be a problem for some. May we not be counted among them.